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SUBJECT: INDIAN REACTION TO PAKISTAN'S MISSILE TEST

REF: ISLAMABAD 2617

CLASSIFIED CONFIDENTIAL BY NEW DELHI POLITICAL  
COUNSELOR ERIC TUNIS, REASON 1.5 (D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: INDIAN OFFICIAL REACTION TO PAKISTAN'S RECENT FLIGHT TEST OF THE GHOURI BALLISTIC MISSILE (REFTEL) HAS BEEN MEASURED THUS FAR. THE NEWS OF THE PAKISTANI MISSILE TEST RAN SECOND TO THE CORONATION OF SONIA GANDHI AS THE NEW LEADER OF THE CONGRESS PARTY IN MOST NEWSPAPERS ON APRIL 7. DEFENSE MINISTER GEORGE FERNANDES GAVE A COOL AND DELIBERATE STATEMENT TO A PRESS CONFERENCE IN NEW DELHI ON THE EVENING OF APRIL 6, NOTING THAT INDIA HAD PRIOR INFORMATION OF THE TEST. FERNANDES DREW A DISTINCTION BETWEEN TEST FIRING OF THE MISSILE AND PRODUCTION, BUT HE AVOIDED ANY COMMENT ON INDIA'S AGNI MISSILE PROGRAM. THE DIRECTOR FOR DISARMAMENT AND SECURITY AFFAIRS (DISA) IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS CONFIRMED THAT THERE HAD BEEN A RECENT SENIOR INTERAGENCY MEETING TO DISCUSS INDIA'S RESPONSE TO THE MISSILE TEST. END SUMMARY

PROMINENT COVERAGE--BUT RELATIVELY MILD REACTION  
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12. (U) INDIAN NEWSPAPERS AND TELEVISION PROVIDED EXTENSIVE BUT NOT INFLAMMATORY COVERAGE OF THE RECENT TEST OF PAKISTAN'S GHOURI BALLISTIC MISSILE. MOST OF THE PRESS STORIES DREW HEAVILY FROM INFORMATION RELEASED PUBLICLY BY PAKISTAN'S FOREIGN MINISTRY AS WELL AS THEIR OWN DECIDEDLY INDIAN ACCOUNT OF FACTS, SUCH AS THE TIMES OF INDIA CLAIM THAT THE TEST WAS CARRIED OUT AT THE KAHUTA NUCLEAR RESEARCH LABORATORY. THIS EVENT HAS PROVIDED ANOTHER FORUM FOR PROMINENT HAWKS IN THE MEDIA--SUCH AS IDSA'S DIRECTOR JASJIT SINGH--TO RENEW CALLS FOR INDIA'S DEVELOPMENT OF THE AGNI BALLISTIC MISSILE SYSTEM. OTHER COMMENTATORS HAVE ALSO PORTRAYED THE GHOURI MISSILE TEST AS CONCLUSIVE PROOF THAT THE U.S. HAS FAILED TO STOP COOPERATION BETWEEN CHINA AND PAKISTAN IN BALLISTIC MISSILE TECHNOLOGY. INDEED, MUCH OF THE INDIAN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE THINKING SEEMS TO REFLECT THE INHERENT DISDAIN FOR PAKISTAN'S SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITY, OF WHICH BRAHMIN HINDUS ARE CONVINCED COULD NOT PRODUCE SUCH A MISSILE INDEPENDENTLY.

13. (U) DEFENSE MINISTER GEORGE FERNANDES WAS THE GOI'S MAIN SPOKESMAN FOR THE INDIAN GOVERNMENT ON THIS ISSUE. IN A PRESS CONFERENCE APRIL 6, HE MADE THE FOLLOWING POINTS:

-- INDIA'S OWN MISSILE PROGRAM IS CONTINUING. PRITHVI MISSILES ARE CAPABLE OF REACHING ANYWHERE IN PAKISTAN;

-- INDIA HAD PRIOR WARNING THAT ISLAMABAD HAD BEEN PREPARING TO TEST A MEDIUM-RANGE MISSILE; HE DESCRIBED THE TEST AS NOT UNEXPECTED BUT OF A SERIOUS NATURE, ALTHOUGH INDIA AND PAKISTAN ARE NOT IN A WAR-LIKE SITUATION;

-- THERE IS A DISTINCTION BETWEEN TESTING AND PRODUCTION; AND

-- IT IS UP TO THE UNITED STATES TO FIND OUT WHAT HAPPENED IN SINO-PAKISTANI MISSILE COOPERATION DESPITE THE EXISTENCE OF MULTILATERAL CONTROL REGIMES.

SOME INSIGHTS FROM MEA

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14. (C) POLOFF MET WITH AJIT KUMAR, DIRECTOR FOR DISARMAMENT AND INTERNATIONAL SECURITY AFFAIRS IN THE MINISTRY FOR EXTERNAL AFFAIRS, ON APRIL 7 (SEE SEPTTEL FOR A DISCUSSION OF CWC ISSUES). KUMAR CONFIRMED THAT SENIOR INDIAN OFFICIALS FROM SEVERAL MINISTRIES HAD MET SEVERAL DAYS AGO TO CONSIDER THE SITUATION REGARDING THE GHAURI MISSILE TEST. KUMAR OPINED THAT FERNANDES WAS SELECTED TO SPEAK ON BEHALF OF THE INDIAN GOVERNMENT BY THIS GROUP; MEA DID NOT INTEND TO MAKE ANY STATEMENT ON THE MATTER. NOT SURPRISINGLY, KUMAR AGREED THAT THE MISSILE ISSUE WAS RIPE FOR DISCUSSION IN AN INDO-PAKISTANI DIALOGUE, BUT HE ACKNOWLEDGED THAT THERE HAD BEEN NO SUBSTANTIVE DISCUSSION OF SECURITY ISSUES AS THE TWO SIDES REMAINED DEAD-LOCKED OVER THE PROCEDURAL LOGJAM OF ADDRESSING KASHMIR.

COMMENT

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15. (C) IN RESPONDING TO THE PAKISTANI MISSILE TEST, WE SUSPECT THE INDIANS WILL ALLOW ACTIONS TO SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS, WITH AN AGNI MISSILE TEST IN THE NEAR FUTURE. IT IS WORTH RECALLING COMMITMENTS BY PREVIOUS INDIAN GOVERNMENTS THAT THE AGNI PROGRAM REMAINED A HIGH PRIORITY, AND THAT THE INDIANS HAVE BEEN MULLING OVER A DECISION TO TEST THE AGNI FOR SOME TIME NOW. INDEED, JASJIT SINGH TOLD US THAT HE MADE ONE MORE RUN AT PUSHING FOR AN AGNI TEST DURING GUJRAL'S FINAL WEEKS IN OFFICE. THIS BJP-LED GOVERNMENT HAS MADE DEFENSE A PROMINENT ISSUE IN ITS AGENDA AND SEVERAL OF ITS "SECURITY EXPERTS" HAVE CALLED FOR GREATER DEVELOPMENT OF LONGER RANGE BALLISTIC MISSILES TO ADDRESS THE PERCEIVED CHINA THREAT. THE DEFENSE MINISTER'S COMMENTS THAT INDIA CAN TARGET ALL OF PAKISTAN WITH PRITHVI MISSILES CERTAINLY BOLSTERS ISLAMABAD'S BELIEF THAT IT NEEDS LONGER RANGE MISSILES TO KEEP UP WITH ITS SOUTH ASIAN NEIGHBOR. THE UPCOMING VISITS OF SENIOR U.S. OFFICIALS WILL PRESENT A USEFUL OPPORTUNITY TO URGE RESTRAINT WITH BOTH SIDES, ALTHOUGH NEW DELHI ALMOST CERTAINLY WILL CONTINUE TO PORTRAY ITS MISSILE PROGRAMS AS A NECESSARY RESPONSE TO THE CHINA THREAT.

CELESTE